

Sacramento Economy
Oral History Project

Interview

With

Mr. Ben Geyen

[This interview was originally conducted for the Fall 1997 History 282C Oral History Seminar with Professor Christopher Castaneda, California State University, Sacramento.

However, another interview was completed and transcribed to satisfy requirements for the class. This "extra" interview transcript was completed October 11, 1999]

Submitted by Amy Holloway

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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

MISSION STATEMENT

A group of graduate students are creating a project to record the memories of persons contributing to Sacramento's diverse economic history. The graduate students are enrolled in History 282C, an oral history seminar, administered by the History Department at California State University, Sacramento. This seminar is part of the required curriculum for the Masters of Arts degree in Public History. The goal of this 1997 fall semester project is to complete 10-15 transcribed oral history interviews. These interviews will represent various aspects of the Sacramento economy.

Once the interviews have been recorded, they will be transcribed and donated to the Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center (SAMCC). Researchers interested in Sacramento's economy will have access to the interview transcriptions at the archives. This seminar/project is being produced under the direction of Dr. Christopher Castaneda, Director of Oral History at California State University, Sacramento.

We welcome your participation in this project. Please feel free to contact Dr. Castaneda by phone (278-5631), or correspondence, if you have any questions about this project.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interviewer/Editor:

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Interview Time and Place:

November 17, 1997: Home of Ben Geyen. Session of one
hour and thirty minutes.

Editing:

Holloway checked the verbatim transcript of the
interview against the original tape recording. Editor
questions are marked with question marks or blank
lines. Editor insertions are bracketed. Mr. Geyen
provided a past resume.

Tape and Interview Records:

The original recording of the interview is located at

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

AH: It is Monday, November 17, 1997. My name is Amy Holloway and I'm interviewing Mr. Ben Geyen, G-E-Y-E-N, today at his home in Kensington, California; and this is an interview for the oral history class, Christopher Castaneda's class at Cal State Sacramento. Thank you very much Mr. Geyen for the opportunity to interview you today. First, I would like to ask you a couple of questions about your background. First I would like to ask when you were born and where you were born.

BG: I was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana in nineteen hundred and eighteen.

AH: And what are your parents' and grandparents' names, and were they from Lake Charles also?

BG: My parents were from Lake Charles, and their names?

AH: Uh-huh.

BG: I'm a junior, so I was named after my father, Ben Geyen, Sr. My mother was also from Lake Charles, Louisiana. And her maiden name was Sallier, Maude Sallier from Lake Charles, Louisiana.

AH: And how about your grandparents?

BG: My grandparents were, both, on my father's side and my mother's side, were from Lake Charles, Louisiana.

AH: And what were their names?

BG: Uh, my grandfather's name, on my father's side was Onezime Geyen and his wife, which was my grandmother, was Sarah Geyen. My grandfather on my mother's side was . . . can I hold just a second while I get that name?

AH: Sure. Uh-huh.

[Break]

AH: So you were telling me.

BG: My grandfather on my mother's side name was Ramo Sallier and my grandmother was named [Millie Sallier].

AH: Now, is your full name Benjamin or Ben?

BG: Well, I was christened Benjamin, however, I'm well known and my signature with everything is Ben.

AH: Okay, could you tell me, um, oh, did you have any brothers and sisters, do you have any brothers and sisters?

BG: Yes, I have two brothers besides myself, and three sisters, so there were six of us. The first three, with me included, we were by a first marriage and my mother passed when I was a baby, so my father married again and he had three children [from that second marriage], two girls and one boy.

AH: And could I ask the names of your siblings?

BG: Yes, my oldest sister's name is Willie Mae and was Geyen. It is [Jackson] now, through marriage. And my, me being the middle person of the first three, my name is Ben Geyen, Jr. My younger brother in the first group was named James Russell Geyen. In the second group of children, my oldest sister is Margaret [Haley]. And I have a brother in Lake Charles, his name is Franklin Geyen. And a baby sister named Claudette Geyen [Holt].

AH: And what was your father's second wife's name?

BG: Second wife's name was Mabel.

AH: Okay. What was your childhood like, and what was Lake Charles, Louisiana like, at that time?

BG: Well, Lake Charles was sort of a aggressive city because it was by a waterfront, not far from Houston, Texas, which is a very popular, large city, about 137 miles away. So, um, Lake Charles was a city that was, more or less, keeping knowledgeable of what was going on in the United States of America.

AH: Um-hum, okay. And what kinds of things did you do as a child?

BG: As a child I uh, I played ball, baseball, interested in the sports, and, um, I took music as a child, played in the high school band, and then played professional after finishing high school. I also played in the band in the service, when I was drafted into the service. Uh, we did just about everything that kids do today. Interested in music, sports, movies and everything else. There was nothing unusual about that.

AH: And what kinds of dreams did you have as a child, in terms of what you wanted to do when you got older?

BG: Well I think that most boys have a feeling that they want to be a lawyer, and you look, you know, to the

role models, and knowing some very outstanding lawyers, you just feel that you want to do that, and yet on the other side, I was a great lover of music, and wanted to be a top musician. So I finally wound up going, more or less, towards music.

AH: Um-hum, hmmm, what instruments?

BG: I played, uh, in high school, and also in the service, I played clarinet and saxophone.

AH: Wow, do you still play?

BG: Pardon?

AH: Do you still play today?

BG: No I don't play anymore. I became so involved in making a living until the music began to [fade away], um, when I was coming along, the music was very widespread with large bands, and you were able to make a living. But then it began to narrow down, and I realized that in order to support a family, I had to do more than just play music (laughs). So I went into the post office. That was one of my first jobs. And then, I did several other things including owning a business of my own.

AH: Great, um, let me ask what schools you went to, like, as a child, your elementary school, the name of your elementary school and other schools?

BG: Yes, I went to, first was a [?] elementary school in Lake Charles, Louisiana [Second Ward Colored High]. And after elementary, I transferred to a Catholic school [Sacred Heart] and finished high school there. And then, while working, after moving from Lake Charles to Chicago--

AH: What year was that?

BG: That was about 1947, I moved from Lake Charles to [Chicago] after the service, after returning from the service, because I was demobilized in about nineteen hundred and forty five.

AH: I'm not familiar with that term. What does demobilized mean?

BG: It was to discharge honorably [to be honorably discharged].

AH: At the end of the War?

BG: At the end of the War, yes, the end of the World War.

AH: So you went into the service at the beginning of the War?

BG: I went into the service at the beginning of the War and remained there until the first of '46, really, and was back in Lake Charles for a couple of years playing music. And then I moved to Chicago to advance more or less in music, but I found myself needing a job very much so I took the post office exam and entered the post office there. While in Chicago I attended Roosevelt University for a couple of years and then I continued . . . After going there for a couple of years I dropped out of school and continued to work in the post office on my uh, for a livelihood.

AH: What branch of the service were you in and what unit did you serve with?

BG: I was first into cadre training in Alabama. In Anniston Alabama I took my basic training as an infantry person and then I was transferred to a quartermaster unit in Massachusetts.

AH: And this is the army.

BG: Yes, in the armed service. And then from there going overseas in the European theater I was in several outfits by being in a band because we uh were attached to whatever stationary group that was gonna be in one location for a while.

AH: Um-hum, And um what kinds of experiences did you have, like which countries did you travel to and what kinds of experiences did you have?

BG: While in the service I did a lot of travelling, starting in Africa, was stationed in Casablanca for a while. Uh, went to Tunisia and Africa, and then we travelled to Italy through the Straights of Gibraltar. We landed in Italy, went to France, Germany and back to France.

AH: Umhum, And um, what, how did it feel being in the army during the war? How did it feel to you when the war ended? How did that feel?

BG: Well, the feeling of being in the service was [pause] It was alright being in the service, serving your country, but it was very frightening, moments with the war going on, the planes passing over your head, you had to run for shelter and fear of [death], at times, that anything could have happened to you. And, knowing

that at certain locations not far from you soldiers were being killed. But uh it so happened that I was lucky I guess because the planes were over us every night just about, the German planes, and they continued to bomb places and we just took rapid cover to shelters, getting away from 'em.

AH: So at the end of the war you came back to Lake Charles and then moved to Chicago.

BG: When I came, when I left, when I was discharged, honorably discharged from the U. S. Army, I went back home in Lake Charles to see my people. I started playing music professionally there again, joined a band and played for about two years and decided to move to Chicago to advance myself in music, more or less. But I found myself needing to get a job as well so I wound up in the post office there in Chicago. And, finally, I met a girl there in Chicago, a person that was teaching in the Illinois and Indiana school system and we got married, and--

AH: What year, what year?

BG: What year?

AH: Umhum.

BG: Got married in 1953 and then finally she wanted to move away to anyplace as a change and we decided to come West.

AH: And what's her name?

BG: Her name was Geraldine Wolf.

AH: And, and, where's she from?

BG: She was born and reared in Chicago.

AH: And, so, how many years did you work in the post office there, about seven?

BG: About eight years in the Chicago post office.

AH: Ok, and then you moved out West.

BG: I moved out West, then I moved out West.

AH: And she had her eyes on the West.

BG: She had her eyes on the West, so . . .

AH: Why was that?

BG: Well, everybody was just moving around from one city or one state to another after World War II and people had this desire to just travel. And she wanted to go anyplace but the first place that accepted her resume was Los Angeles and we moved to Los Angeles. And, uh, I did not like Los Angeles and finally I decided to look around in California for other places that I would be interested in and I decided on Sacramento because I was so encouraged by the people of Sacramento. I was affiliated with the post office for a while, for a short while. And they threw open their doors to me, sort of red carpet. And, uh, so I decided to move to Sacramento.

AH: So you came to Los Angeles, what about 1954 ?

BG: No, it was about '58, '59.

AH: '58 okay or '59, and then how long did you stay there?

BG: I didn't stay there any time. I did not stay in Los Angeles any time, maybe a couple of months and that was it.

AH: Oh, and moved to Sacramento that fast.

BG: Sacramento that fast yes.

AH: So your wife quit her new job?

BG: She just transferred to the school system in Sacramento.

AH: Ok, Okay. Um, so then how was Sacramento?

BG: Sacramento was alright for a while but it was a small city. Uh, I had been used to Chicago and Chicago was, is a city of many interests and a lot of capabilities.

AH: You didn't find Los Angeles that way?

BG: I found myself having a nostalgia for Chicago quite often.

AH: Wait, can I ask, so you didn't find Los Angeles kind of busy, or whatever, like Chicago?

BG: I found Los Angeles being a big, sprawled out city and not accessible to many things, and, uh, it was just not a city like New York or Chicago, atmosphere. And I just didn't like Los Angeles at all.

AH: Ok, and so, um, in Sacramento again, um . . .

BG: In Sacramento I found myself since I was out here, trying to get established, I found Sacramento a quiet city, a very quiet city, and, uh, easy to, um, very easy to meet people, and sort of make my way in interesting activities, sort of trying to replace what I was used to in Chicago.

AH: And what work did you enter into in Sacramento?

BG: Say that again.

AH: What work did you enter into in Sacramento?

BG: Uh, I went into the post office for a while, and then, leaving the post office I opened a business of my own. I thought I would venture into some type of business, and I thought that women's apparel would be an interesting sort of thing since I had some knowledge--I have a sister that worked for small shops and so sometimes I found her conversation interesting about windowdressing, styles of clothes, and I decided that perhaps I would try women's apparel.

AH: And what year did you begin your business and what was the name of it?

BG: Uh, I set up a business in the year of nineteen and sixty-five in Sacramento, think it was sixty, just a second, I think the correct time was nineteen sixty-six. And I applied for a small business loan from the federal government to start this business. With my savings, along with my savings, I located myself in a nice neighborhood called Curtis Park and there I was able to find a place to start my business. And I leased the building from a person named Petrelli at the time. Mr. Petrelli was a plumber and I got to know him very well. And he had been a superintendent out at the McClellan Air Force Base and so we got to know one another, and he had a place for leasing and I leased his place and started this business on women's apparel on my own. And the name of the shop was Geyen's Modern Look Shop located at 2813 Franklin Boulevard, Sacramento, California 95818.

AH: Great, now you mentioned to me the other day that you were one of a few African Americans who received these start-up loans. Could you tell me about that?

BG: Yes. A small business loan, and I'm sure a lot of people are acquainted with it, is highly advertised by the government, but it's very hard to get this small business loan. It's a lot of screening to get the small business loan. And I had only been in Sacramento

about ten years when I decided to apply for a small business loan. Well at that time it was very hard for blacks to get into any type of business anyplace but it seemed more and more [?] at the time because we were going through a great transition. Blacks were really pushing for civil rights. Martin Luther King, the Black Panthers, Malcolm X was on the scene then. And the Bank of America was one of the few places that was an agency for making loans at that time. There were no federal agencies that we have today. There were other credit unions but, to apply for a small business loan, you had to go a lending institution that was recommended by the federal government and so I went to the Bank of America in Sacramento and applied for this loan. At the time I think, having been in Sacramento only about ten years, there were about two or three other African Americans that were also trying to get loans. It was very difficult and it is still today to get a small business loan. It's a lot of screening and background, the government wanted to know your capabilities. And the Bank of America threw their arms around me at that particular time, because they had been having problems with the African American race because they were being boycotted because they were not hiring any Blacks at all, not even window tellers in '58, '59. And when I applied for this loan, they seemed to want to go on record as helping Black people

get located or situated. And they were very instrumental in helping me to do the correct things in order to get this loan. However, it took almost three years for me to get the loan because, as you know, the government is so slow about everything and my funds were just about depleted and they required a certain amount of money on hand, a percentage. And, finally, having worked in the post office for a while, I knew Congressman Moss. Congressman Moss had been back in Congress for over thirty some odd years and I was told that maybe I could help the bank a little by knowing someone that was really a politician and so the bank encouraged me to go that route or to seek out someone that had some sort of clout to help me. And I went to, I got to know Congressman Moss through the post office, and then I met him again at a ballet studio because his daughter was having ballet classes and so was my daughter. And I got to know him. And I went to his office and told him that I had been trying to get a loan for a number of years and the Bank of America had all my records and they were helping me as much as possible, and . . . [tape ended]

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

AH: Moss?

BG: Yes, I met Congressman Moss as I forstated while working at the post office and also, again, I met him at a ballet studio where he was taking his daughter to classes and I was taking my daughter also. And I met Congressman Moss at that time. And then I thought of Congressman Moss when I was having such a struggle to get this loan through. And at that time I didn't know what to do so I went to his office and immediately I got to--I did not talk to him, I talked to his assistant and shortly after that, it didn't take much time for me to get the loan. At the time that I applied for the loan, it was only three blacks in the whole city of Sacramento that I knew of that had applied. Many had applied and didn't get any place, but it was about three of us that got started. Even though our business was quite a struggle and I lasted about ten years, but at least we did get started. I did and also the other, two other African Americans that I know of.

AH: Uhhuh, and what kind of women's apparel did you sell, Like where did you get your stock from?

BG: Uh, my, I got started with going to the markets in San Francisco. I learned about the markets in San Francisco. And I had my sister from Seattle that was used to working with, uh, clothing and small shops, window dressing and everything, and she came down from Seattle to help me get set up. And then I took on a couple of assistants that had experience, a dressmaker by the name of Mrs. [Math?] was a dressmaker and she also helped me to make selections. We went to the fashion shows in San Francisco. We went to fashion shows down in Los Angeles. We bought clothing from the markets of Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York.

AH: And how was business, um?

BG: Business, for the beginning, it seemed like it was going to really take off. Uh, it was something new, and, uh, a lot of black people had not been involved in such, and I had a lot of, uh, advertisement, and I thought that thing was going to really take, move, but then it came along, this, uh [pause]... I call it, uh, called it tough times. And a lot of businesses were failing all over Sacramento and all over California I presume. It was such a time when, uh, interest rates were high, uh, business was very competitive, [vintage?] stores like White Front was operating at that time and they were like WalMart, WalMart or

Woolworth's or things like that and they began failing, and after being in business for about pretty close to ten years, the neighborhood that I opened my store in was beginning to become economically [obsolete] and because it was the rioting periods, my clothing shop was struck every Christmas. It was during the time that they had the Watts problem down in Los Angeles and this seemed to spread all over the state of California, especially in cities of any size like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Sacramento or the Bay Area. And I began having my problems, so much so that, uh, the neighborhood that my shop was in, uh, they refused to, there was so much rioting going on, they refused to, uh, insurance companies refused to give insurance. And so blacks had to operate without insurance in many areas that the ones that had started and some that went out of business before my shop did, because I was one of the last ones to begin failing because I was in a pretty good neighborhood to begin with.

AH: When you first started or during the time of your business, where did you advertise?

BG: Uh, well I advertised in the papers, Sacramento paper. We had, I had put up, we uh, I started with fly sheets in the neighborhoods, uh, mailing out, and then I also had, uh, little boys that would deliver fly sheets all

over the area, in the area. Other advertisers were through the church, leaving leaflets in the [?] of the churches and things like that.

AH: Did it, was it like everybody knew you, you know, was your shop the kind of place where everybody would say "Oh, well let's go to Geyen's," you know like everybody was familiar with your shop?

BG: Well in the neighborhood that my shop was located I was well known because, uh, a lot of people had seen me in the post office and I had a credibility with people and I was one of the, a person that could easily meet people. And, I felt that at one time, that by word of mouth I could do a lot of business. But I found out that it took a little bit more than that, and especially just to get the black African trade because they're people that really screen one another and, uh, if you're doing real great, you can get that following. But if you're not doing, if you're just trying to make a living in that way and you need them, then most of the time they're not available to you.

AH: So was your clientele from, like, most all Afr-, um, all ethnic groups or mainly African American?

BG: No, most of the--the neighborhood that my shop was in was mostly white. Well, blacks, Americans, African Americans was not very far from it. It was easy and accessible to blacks. But, it was in a mostly white neighborhood that, professional people, teachers, uh, state workers in Sacramento. And yet, I was exposed tremendously to black people. They knew where I was, the people knew where I was. It was in a location in Downtown, more or less Downtown Sacramento, or in the area of Sacramento that was very accessible.

AH: And where were you living at this time?

BG: I was living in Sacramento not far from my shop--

AH: In Curtiss Park also?

BG: Uh, I was living in, between Curtiss Park and William Land Park in Sacramento, so it was a very nice area that I lived in and not far away from my shop--maybe about ten blocks away from my shop.

AH: Hm, did your neighborhood have like a different name like Curtiss Park or William Park? Did your neighborhood have a certain name?

BG: Uh, no it didn't have any. It was, my area that I lived in was considered, uh, near William Land Park and near Curtiss Park.

AH: Ok.

BG: Near, it was called near William Land Park area or near Curtiss Park area.

AH: What was your address?

BG: My address--

AH: Where you lived.

BG: Where I lived, was 1933 Larkin Way.

AH: Uh-huh, and so you purchased a home at that address?

BG: That's where I was living. I started out leasing a place there.

AH: Um, ok I wanted to ask when you mentioned the riots and all, oh, I'm sorry, first I wanted to ask what kinds of people lived in your neighborhood. Was it like the same kind of neighborhood as Curtiss Park?

BG: In the neighborhood I lived it was—on the street I lived when I moved to Sacramento, it was only two black people on the street. But, Sacramento was a city, and I'll say, put it, say it like this: it was very, um, people lived all over Sacramento at the time. It was a very few, um, African Americans in Sacramento--

AH: You want me to let you get your phone? I'll turn the tape off, so you can get your phone, your phone's ringing.

[Pause]

AH: Ok, I'm sorry you were talking about, um, Sacramento-- and the African Americans, the, I guess the population.

BG: In this area where I lived, it was only, mostly white neighborhood, and it was only, about, well two people besides myself that were African American. But I noticed at that particular time, when I came to Sacramento, that Sacramento did not have, uh, what we would consider a segregated, sort of place as other places like San Francisco and Oakland. You could live just about any place in Sacramento and it was no challenge to white people to where you were. And, of course, I'm sure in the outlying areas you probably would run into that. However, just being a hardworking

person and not professional at that time, you could just about live in mostly any neighborhood in the Sacramento area. And it wasn't what we called discrimination at the time because it was not too many blacks, so I guess the whites did not feel challenged by that.

AH: Uh-huh, um, during this time when you owned your business, were you involved with many, like, community groups or did you belong to a church?

BG: Yes, while I owned the business and before, I belonged to the United Church of Christ which is a Congregational. And, uh, I was quite active in the church, held different offices in the church. And I was well known, and, um, so even though I did not really belong to any club per se I was still invited to many affairs that the clubs would have.

AH: And, uh, where was the church located and what kinds of people were in the church?

BG: Uh, the church was located in Oak Park at the time. And it was during the time that Oak Park was pretty nice, small little community to live in. And, uh, it was a mixed neighborhood. And, um, being a Congregational, it wasn't many blacks that belonged to

Congregational. So in order to keep my, our church going the Board back in New York had to put in white timetellers, in order to help us to survive.

AH: What does that mean, a timeteller?

BG: Timeteller, is, well they were the lent whites from other churches that were doing well--because they had eight churches in the Sacramento Valley association that were Congregational. But at that time they would not allow black memberships. So in order to keep our church surviving, they went--let's see uh, the board in New York arranged, or was, well I would say arranged, to have other white churches that were willing to lend memberships to support our church and pay membership dues and had different activities there in the church. I mean they were--actually timetellers were people that became members of our church, temporarily, for a period of time, maybe for six months, or for a year, some whites would be lent out from their church, or they were recognized by their church to let them go into our church, which is the black United Church of Christ and to participate and work as, along with the members of our church as if they were members of the church. And at that time none of the white churches, having eight churches in the Sacramento Valley Association, they

were not ready to allow blacks to become members of their congregations.

AH: Hmm, when did they begin allowing...

BG: Well, I really don't know because I been Sacram--I'm away from, I got away from the church for some time and after my business failed I went into real estate--

AH: Could I--

BG: Go ahead.

AH: Before we go into the real estate part, could I ask you, um, regarding the riot situation, um, I know you mentioned Watts and all, could you say as far as in the Sacramento area, were there any particular reasons, like local to Sacramento, why the riots were happening?

BG: Yeah, the riots in Sacramento began, I think it was, uh, sort of a catch on from the Watts area, where it was rioting, and then the Black Panthers that were in, located in Oakland, moved an office to Sacramento. And, uh, then they had what they call, the Youth Congress there. And, uh, it was just a lot of looting going on during those years, robbing and looting places, striking back for reasons of segregation in

other parts of California, like Los Angeles, being number one, and Oakland, also. So it was just a strike back, a backlash of the black people at that time because of bigotry and race all over the state.

AH: And, in terms of its particular affect on your business?

BG: Well it did have an affect on my business in that the black Americans were robbing wherever, they were looting and being destructive any place that they could and especially close to their neighborhoods, which I wasn't too far, being black, I wasn't too far away from their neighborhood, the shops. And they had, residents that they could run and hide and the police would never be able to catch them. I was robbed and I reported my robberies every year not only to income tax but to the police every time my place was hit and they never did catch any one. Very seldom, they would--very seldom the police would have and--lot of these people probably had never done anything or they didn't have any fingerprints on them. And so, they just youngsters, just very difficult to catch once they would rob.

AH: And you'd also mentioned like the interest rates and all that affected your, your business?

BG: Yes the interest rates wasn't doing too--the economy was really, in the United States, was really down during those years. And Sacramento has never been a city that has been a very aggressive city. Uh, so uh the economy was always at a kind of low, uh it was at a low key. So Sacramento was not a city that was very attractive to many people.

AH: Um, I've got two more questions about, two last questions about your business, one--

BG: You want to talk about Sacramento at all?

AH: Yes, um after your business, then the real estate, and then--

BG: Ok, I just wanted to know because I wasn't going to get into something, you know, until you got ready for it.

AH: Oh ok, um well one is was your business listed in any like African American business directories or were you involved with like a Black Chamber of Commerce or were you involved with the Sacramento Chamber of Commerce?

BG: I was listed with the yellow pages not as a black business per se, just a business in a neighborhood community well known community. People knew where my

shop was. I was well known in Sacramento. Uh, I had worked on other jobs and uh I got to know many people. And uh, so uh, it was not advertised as African American clothes or nothing, it was for everybody. So, and I got, I had--my business for the major time that I was in business, I had about 70% white [was over?] black people. The whites kept my business going, because I was not far from a white neighborhood, and as I said, it was people that, like state workers, that needed changes quite frequently. They wanted to wear different things, and uh, on the job. And I had just a, well I say, sort of a variety of not exclusive but nice dress and also regular wear clothing. And I kept it that way in order to always have business. So as I first stated I got at least about 70, 75% white [pay?], and that's what kept my business going.

AH: Ok, and um, let's see redevelopment, that was later on, [I know?]. Were you affected at all by redevelopment, or is that a different area?

BG: Uh, when you're talking about redevelopment, what are you talking about in specific?

AH: Like I guess that was a different area, because that was the part of downtown that they started like

renovating and stuff and some businesses were relocated but I guess that was a different area?

BG: Well it was somewhat during the same time because shops were moving away from downtown and downtown was beginning to fail. And it was during rough times, that my business was failing too because they were moving away from the city, moving to outlying areas, shopping areas and outlying areas of Sacramento. So therefore they were leaving the downtown area just like they were all over the United States at that time. And people just moved out to suburban areas. And the downtown area began to fail. So not being very far, distant, from the downtown area, that had really had some affect on my business.

AH: And, um, when, let's see you had your business until what year?

BG: Until about '75.

AH: Ok, and then after that, did another business come into the same space or building, or do you know if it, if it stayed vacant?

BG: When I left my business the place stayed vacant for quite some time and then it changed, the business

changed completely to something else but I can't remember now what it was but it was not like clothing or anything.

AH: Ok, so then you started moving in the direction of real estate? Like how did you get interested in that after your business?

BG: Well first I started working at any place to just keep myself going, because I had taken such a loss in the business at that time. I started out doing excellent and I had the, I think it was the bank or the government had--and when I say government I'm talking about the people that perhaps knew that I had a small business loan, and they could come at anytime and check on me. They sent to me a couple of people that were _____ for Sears Roebuck at the time to look at my business, see how I was coming along. My location, and they noticed that the location was beginning to be a bad thing for my business so they advised me. But at that time you lost quite a bit of money and you needed [to reach out?] hand again and if I had been more experienced in the business I probably could have gone back because I had a good record with small business. And I had paid all my creditors and so I probably could have gone back, but being inexperienced I did not know what were the possibilities of perhaps moving into a

mall in the outskirts as the redevelopment started. I probably could have had a loan renewed, not knowing for sure. But I had done, had reached a low ebb at that time and I just felt that--another thing I wasn't aware that it was a possible chance of me really making a different type of move and then I'm just second guessing.

AH: So, entering, um, how did you enter the real estate?

BG: So after closing my business, closing down the business, uh--

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

AH: . . . Side 1 the interview with Ben Geyen. Ok Mr. Geyen you were telling me about entering the real estate business in Sacramento.

BG: Well after I felt that my business was really not going to make it, naturally I had to look other places and for a short time I did take a job as a manager of a store. I was selected to go to Sacramento Association of Retarded, to run one of those thrift shops for Sacramento retarded--

AH: I'm sorry Sacramento what?

BG: Retarded, Sacramento retarded for retarded children.

AH: Oh, ok.

BG: Uh, I uh, met a person that was working with United Lincoln Center and having classes there and artifacts and what have you, and he noticed that I had this dress shop and he knew that I was closing shop. And so I just happened to be talking to him and he recommended me to one of the executives of the Sacramento retarded children thrift store. So I worked with them for a while and decided from there to go back to school and take real estate. I had already taken about six months of real estate at Sacramento Junior College. And I never put it to any use and so then I decided to go into real estate. At this time I decided to go into real estate and I went to one of the top schools of real estate with a very good average. And it's called _____ Real Estate School and it had one of the highest ratings in California. So I went through refreshing myself with real estate and all, but life started over again. And I went to the school and I did alright with the school, but then I took the Department of Real Estate examination and passed it. And from then on it was clear sailing because I was very

familiar with sales and I did very well in real estate. I managed, assistant managed, one of the Century 21 offices and I began to recover from the loss of my store. And uh, I think real estate was very easy to me after having such a struggle in the clothing business. Clothing is really rough because you're sitting and waiting for people to come and buy. With real estate you can really go out and use your own clues without cost, without any cost to you, and really get involved with people and sell houses. So I began to work in real estate. And uh I did very well. And uh did well for my family. And also, I sort of moved around from sales to assistant manager and that sort of thing. And uh I stayed in real estate about twenty years before I decided to retire.

AH: What kinds of properties did you sell?

BG: I sold resident and I sold uh income property, apartments, duplexes, and that was most of my [line?]. Well we sold land also bare, bare land, raw land. So, those are the things.

AH: Was the real estate business like a growing industry? Were a lot of people buying throughout those years?

BG: Yes, during that time I hit it, I hit real estate just right and this is one of the things that happened in Sacramento that in '76 or the beginning of '76, late '75, and I had been out of my business for a couple of years. Uh, the real estate market began to really take off and this is one of the periods that was really sort of a booming period in Sacramento, a lively period which Sacramento had never experienced. So uh well I stayed into real estate all this time until I decided to leave in '96, December of '96 I retired.

AH: And um, in terms of like the African American community in Sacramento and housing, um were there any like problems or issues, or was it pretty much fine?

BG: No, uh, when I first started in real estate in Sacramento, there were certain areas, just like we've had, they wouldn't allow blacks into the neighborhood. Uh, it was really a rough time in Sacramento for blacks in just about anything and real estate was no different. Whites didn't want black agents to handle their property. They didn't want blacks to live in certain areas, so uh, it was the same old thing coming around but at the same time real estate was the market that you could be, you could really try something else. When I say try something else, I mean try another area, try another location for black people to live in and

when people wanted to sell their homes, they didn't mind who would buy it in Sacramento, if they really wanted to sell it.

AH: Did you sell to a large number of African American clients?

BG: Did I do--?

AH: Were you doing business or selling to a large number of African American clients?

BG: I sold to everybody, but my biggest business at one time was Hispanic and a number, and a few, and a number of Blacks. My largest clientele was Hispanics. Then I had white also.

AH: And that was in a variety of neighborhoods or--?

BG: Yes, you had to be very, there were certain areas that was available to people and then it was an area that they didn't want certain people in the neighborhood. However, the law was that real estate is a colorblind sort of thing. And it was a very strong law that was enforced. Naturally they used, at that time, they used all kinds of methods of keeping Blacks out of certain areas, keeping Orientals out of certain neighborhoods.

A lot of people didn't want them. And uh of course I never would use the term and none of the agents I knew, white or black, would dare and especially after the Rumford Act came along, which was one of the best things that ever happened to the real estate business. I think Rumford was a wonderful person and he was a brilliant man and the time was right and he was able to get this bill through. And from then on it made it easy for black realtors to sell property and to really locate people.

AH: What did the Rumford Act say?

BG: The Rumford Act said . . . if a person had something available for sale, they could not say to you that it wasn't available, like they used to do. And it was, they were very uh, the law was so strict until, that whites had to be very careful. And if they did it they had to do it in very discreet sort of way, that you didn't know anything about it. But the Rumford Act was one of the, as I say again, it was one of the best things that ever happened to real estate. And then uh, from then on, there were other bills that passed that were very similar to it. I'm trying to think of the treasurer of California state at that time, he's well known, and he also was instrumental in promoting a bill that would help.

AH: And um, what neighborhood did you live in at this time,
while you were--did you live in the same neighborhood?

BG: I lived in the same neighborhood.

AH: Ok, so you stayed in that neighborhood throughout your
. . . ?

BG: Right.

AH: Ok, did you have children?

BG: I had one daughter.

AH: Uh-huh, what year was she born?

BG: She was born in about '55.

AH: Oh, ok, so she came, made the move with you from--

BG: Well she didn't move immediately, but then afterwards
she did.

AH: What city was she born in?

BG: She was born in Chicago.

AH: Ok.

BG: My daughter was born in Chicago.

AH: And then she moved to Sacramento later.

BG: She came to Sacramento.

AH: What was um, like your favorite sale--?

BG: My favorite sale?

AH: Yeah, during your time in real estate, do you have like a sale that stands out for you?

BG: Well, they had, this was a new development area called Greenhaven, a very exclusive area. And uh people were coming from, ok, and I'm talking about Sacramento now, because this was the time that the economy of Sacramento sort of hit a little high level and I say very prosperous times. It was only a couple, Sacramento has always been a very slow city as far as economics were concerned and I'd like to refer to something here in the notes.

AH: Ok, do you want me to stop for a second?

[Pause in tape]

AH: Ok.

BG: Sacramento, for the most part has been a city of slow economy. One of the main reasons, it never encouraged big business or business of industrial expansion. Uh, also, jobs of consistencies and fair pay were largely state employees requiring high school education plus and also examinations, tests. _____ was another source of federal installation, another source of business but it was limited. And McClellan Air Force Base, which today is very prominent because the President has saved it, that was another source of employment yet it was out of Sacramento in North Highland. So, the most, and I'm talking for the benefit of, you know, real estate and everything else in Sacramento being at a low key. One of the prosperous years, I mean a few prosperous years were doing the time of Governor Edmund Brown which was between about 1960 and 1994, was one of the prosperous periods--

AH: And '64?

BG: I'm saying during his, during the time that Edmund Brown was in office from '59 to uh, I think he was in

office till sixty about '67. And they had a little prosperous spirit, prosperous in Sacramento at that time because Aerojet had the uh, because [pause, going through notes]

AH: You want me to stop?

BG: You ready?

AH: Go ahead.

BG: . . . During the years, prosperity was during Governor Brown from about '59 to '67.

AH: Ok.

BG: During this administration when Aerojet contractor's plant began in Sacramento and began receiving U. S. government contracts luring professionals, skillful and blue collar workers into Sacramento. That was a period when the Sacramento economy had improved quite a bit. And then the only other period of growth in Sacramento came during like '75 to '79 when the real estate struck a high _____ for investments as well as residents because the overcrowded and shortage of houses in the East and West Bay Area, they started moving to Sacramento. So it helped our business in real estate.

And uh, otherwise Sacramento has always been rather slow, has always had a very slow economy . . .

AH: Ok.

BG: Uh, with many unskilled people, of very little education such as farmers, farmhands, immigrants and cannery workers. The highly advertised farm work drew many unskilled laborers into Sacramento. So uh the [pause tape, going through notes]

AH: Ok.

BG: Speaking about the Sacramento economy, it's always been, as I said, a very slow economy with exception of the time when Governor Edmund Brown was here and the Aerojet, during his administration, opened the contractor's plant which got a lot of business from the U. S. government. So they brought people from all over the United States, professional and skillful people along with blue collar workers. But after Aerojet began to close, would close down, then we lost all those people that were professional, so we didn't have any industries, more or less, for these outstanding people to sort of promote a better economy in Sacramento. Mostly in Sacramento many unskilled people with very little education such as farmhands,

immigrants, [nomads?] galore. The highly advertised farm drew many unskilled people in Sacramento because Sacramento was a farmer's town. And so this being that critical, African Americans have had a hard time trying to get established in business or investments of status. The reason, unable to get funds or loans and lack of opportunities to them. Uh, with the masses, and I repeat, with the masses of people in Sacramento being mostly civil servants, blue collar workers and farmhands, it has been hard for the natives, or residents of [forty?] years in Sacramento to muster up enough funds to make any kind of investments without it being a great risk to their life savings. These conditions for African Americans have been even worse because on most jobs, promotion for them come very slow. Therefore they, Black Americans or African Americans, are usually on a job ten or fifteen years before they reach a bracket or level to pay to be able to put in savings a little above their living expenses. There's very few Blacks that are in any business of significance in Sacramento, especially any that seem to have strong potential. There are the frequent small barber shops, hair dressing, hole in the wall cafes, and that continues to be for the black people in Sacramento.

AH: So you retired you said in 1996.

BG: Yes.

AH: Um, did you, was this your first time moving to this area, or did you already have a home here also?

BG: Well, no, um, I retired in 1996. However my wife here, we had been together for a number of years. This is my second wife that I'm talking about--

AH: Oh, ok.

BG: Because the other wife that I moved west with, we still did not, I moved west because of her, because I wanted to remain in Chicago. However, after putting my roots down here, especially into business and real estate, we never did make out. So I met a person in Berkeley that I had known the family [of] in Lake Charles. And she had already been _____ in Berkeley, or Kensington for a number of years. And uh--

AH: And here she comes [Mrs. Geyen enters the house]

BG: So, we uh, we got married. After the divorce, my first wife moved back to Chicago, and I haven't seen her for years.

AH: And what is the name of your present wife?

BG: My present wife is named Eleanor, Eleanor Geyen.

AH: And what year did you all get married?

BG: Pardon.

AH: What year did you all get married?

BG: We got married in eighty, I think it was eighty, we've been married over ten years, I can't say but we got married in the eighties.

[Mrs. Geyen walks in]

AH: How are you doing Mrs. Geyen? Here she is.

EG: I'm fine, how are you?

AH: I'm fine. My name is Amy Holloway. Been nice talking to you on the phone.

EG: Same here.

AH: I'm in a class at Cal State Sacramento, an oral history class and I met Mr. Geyen at the Bay Area Paul Robeson Centennial Committee meeting, and so he was kind enough

to do an interview for us. So it's nice to meet you. So, we're just about finished. Um, I wanted to say--is your daughter out here, or is she in Chicago?

BG: She's in Sacramento.

AH: In Sacramento, ok. What's her name?

BG: Her name is Donna, Donna Geyen.

AH: Is there anything else you would like to share?

BG: To do what?

AH: Is there anything else that you would like to share for the interview?

BG: I think not, your questions just about covered it?

AH: Uh-huh, especially that part that you shared regarding your thoughts on the Sacramento economy. Well I'd like to thank you very much for this interview, um in giving, sharing experiences with your work in Sacramento and really giving insight to what it was like for you and also for African Americans and what it was like for people in Sacramento in general. So, um--

BG: You know, a lot of people are not really honest about the conditions, but that's the way, you know, even right now, I have had a difference, even with the paper, you know you talked about. . . Lee

AH: You want me to have this on still?

BG: Well I just want to show you the . . .

AH: Oh my gosh, look at you, so this is in the Sacramento Observer, on Thursday, April 3, 1969, p.38. Wow, and there you are and the caption says "Store owner--

BG: This is the people working for me . . .

AH: In your shop?

BG: Yes.

AH: Ok and it says, "Store owner Ben Geyen looks over one of the many apparels in his shop" and in the other picture "The Modern Look Shop officially opened for business this past weekend."

BG: Yes, that's when I got the loan. However my business had been open, but you know, it had been open, I had

been operating on my own until I got this loan. And this was when I got this small business loan, that it was really recognized then and advertised.

AH: Wow, could we make a photocopy of this some time, or could I get a photocopy--maybe I could even make a copy off of microfilm at school. I'll write down the date and then I'll check at school and see if I could make a photocopy off the microfilm, if that's alright, and then I could put it with the tape.

BG: Oh ok, you want this now?

AH: No, they have the newspaper on microfilm at the school, so I'll write down the date and see if I could make a photocopy from the microfilm.

BG: Ok.

AH: Ok.

BG: You feel pretty sure that you can get it that way?

AH: Hm-hmm. But if not I will ask you, for sure. This is great. Ok so I'm going to turn off the tape now.
Thanks again.

[End Tape 2, Side A] [End Interview]